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## The Electoral System and Women's Political Representation in Romania

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### Abstract

Taking into account the influence of mentalities and attitudes on the construction of the political imaginary, the author is questioning the possibility if the parity or the quotas can become in the future a source of inspiration for the political representation of women in Romania. This essay analyses two francophone models, France and Belgium, where the quotas and parity are applied, and which represented during the last two centuries sources of inspiration for the electoral and constitutional framework of Romania.

**Keywords:** political imaginary, quotas, parity, feminism, proportional system, majority system

### 1. Introduction

Our study proposes to take into account the situation of the political representation of women in Romania, taking into consideration the Belgian and French models that our country has had over time. The purpose of this study is whether France and Belgium, two models of Romania during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, can now become models regarding the participation of women in political life. The proportional system favors women candidates, while the majority system disadvantages them. Is it possible to consider the future of electoral laws such as parity or quotas that currently apply in

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France, respectively in Belgium? For the gender equality to be respected and ensured in the political field, such measures are necessary.

The discussion will focus on the history of Romania, where France and Belgium have established constitutional or electoral models. We will then analyze the political imaginaries in Romania, France and Belgium during the period between the two World Wars, a period marked by the beginning of the political empowerment of women. This analysis is necessary to understand the changing role of women in the political imagination, which presupposes differences and similarities between the three countries. Then we will go to our main question: France and Belgium can become again models for Romania regarding the promotion of women in politics? This question is based on an analysis of the application of laws on gender quotas in France and Belgium to see the impact of these measures on gender relations in politics. We will discover the limitations and shortcomings of these laws. Another minor issue is related to the main question we ask ourselves if the electoral system may change the place of women in the political imagination, transforming the "woman-mother" into "politician". A brief comparison with the countries of Northern Europe will show that regardless of the electoral system, which applies quotas or parity, what is important is the openness of attitudes towards women seen as professionals of politics. In a country where women gained political rights at the beginning of the century, in 1906, as is the case in Finland<sup>1</sup>, parity in politics is normal, even if a proportional system is applied.

## 2. France and Belgium: The Old Models of Romania

France has been a model for Romania during the period 1830-1848, Lucian Boia considering that when we refer to Western models, we must think first of France and then of other Western countries<sup>2</sup>. As for Belgium, it was the second model for Romania, the small "*francophone, monarchical, neutral, democratic and prosperous*"<sup>3</sup> country being a more appropriate model. Our country had a constitution in 1866 which was inspired by the Belgian Constitution of 1831, Romania being the "*Belgium of the East*"<sup>4</sup> during the second half of the nineteenth century. We will focus in this section of the article on the Belgian model.

The Belgian Constitution of 1831 was inspired, in turn, from the French Constitution and was the foundation for a centralized unitary state<sup>5</sup>. Regarding political equality between women and men, the voting census introduced a citizenship that had limited access: only men who could pay the census were allowed to vote. The exclusion of suffrage is sexual and social during the nineteenth century and social inequality becomes part of Belgian society<sup>6</sup>. The census was set between 20 and 100 guilders, being different for urban and rural areas. Under these conditions, only 1% of the population had the right to vote. In 1848 the Belgian government reduced the census to 20 guilders fearing the impact of the French Revolution on the "petite bourgeoisie" who was deprived of the right to vote. Following this change the percentage of voters increased to 2%. In 1888 a law recognized the male capability to vote for provincial and municipal elections, and in 1893 the Article 47 of the Constitution was revised, the suffrage was abolished and

<sup>1</sup> Marques-Pereira B. 2003. *La citoyenneté politique des femmes*, Paris, Armand Colin, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Boia L. 2005. *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, București, Humanitas, ediția a 4-a, p. 262.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>4</sup> Vlad L. 2004. *Pe urmele "Belgiei Orientului". România la expozițiile universale sau internaționale de la Anvers, Bruxelles, Liège și Gand (1894-1935)*, București, Nemira.

<sup>5</sup> Seiler D.-L. 1999. *Un État entre importation et implosion : consociativité, partitocratie et lotissement dans la sphère publique en Belgique*, in Delwit, De Waele, Magnette, (sous la direction), *Gouverner la Belgique. Clivages et compromis dans une société complexe*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 15-50.

<sup>6</sup> Gubin É., Van Molle L. 1998. *Femmes et politique en Belgique*, Bruxelles, Racine, p. 29.

replaced by a hybrid system, the plural vote. According to this Revision, every man over the age of 25 years could have one vote, and one vote or more were assigned to certain categories of citizens, depending on their marital status, their real estate and their profession<sup>7</sup>. In Belgium, the vote was a function and not a right, the citizen was the man who owned a property. The electoral reform in 1893 introduced compulsory voting, and Belgium became the first democracy that used this type of vote.

In 1866 Romania was modeled after the Belgian Constitution which introduced the census vote for men who could pay the census. The Romanian Constitution of 1866 introduced four constituencies for the Assembly of Deputies, reduced to three by the law of 1884. The first college for the Assembly of Deputies met all citizens with an income of minimum 1200 lei. Citizens who lived in towns and paid an annual charge of at least 20 lei were part of the second college. The third college gathered those who paid a tax whose level did not count<sup>8</sup>. The age of voters was 25 years until 1866 and then it decreased to 21, while candidates had to have at least 30 years. The Senate level census was greater: To be on the lists of the first college, the annual income had to be minimum 2000 lei, while for the second college the income had to be between 800 and 2000 lei. The age requirement limited the number of registered lists: voters and candidates had to be at least 40 years old. To get elected, candidates for the Senate had to have an income of at least 9400 lei, a condition that limited their number.

After the First World War there were different electoral systems in the Kingdom, Bukovina and Transylvania: in the Kingdom we applied the proportional system, and in Transylvania and Bukovina the majority system. This system forced politicians to adopt a proportional system for the whole country from 1926.

The Electoral Act of 1926 did not bring political equality between men and women. During the period 1918-1922 Romania applied a system that combined the Belgian electoral law that used the majority vote, with local traditions represented by proportional representation. This electoral system produced regionalism and in 1926 it was inspired by the Mussolini model: Romania took from Italy the electoral premium which proclaimed as winners of elections the parties that obtained 40% of votes. The new electoral law of 1926 was applied until 1937 and gave birth to the "*electoral dance*", as described by Matei Dogan<sup>9</sup>. King Charles II put an end to this electoral dance in 1938, when he dissolved the parliament and founded his authoritarian regime.

The entry of women into politics occurred in 1929 when a new electoral law granted certain categories of women the right to elect and to be elected at the municipal level<sup>10</sup>.

### 3. Women in the Political Imaginary

In the first half of the twentieth century in Romania, as in France and Belgium, women represented in the imagination of citizenship "the nation", while men accounted for "the State"<sup>11</sup>. By virtue of their

<sup>7</sup> This chronology of the right to vote is available in Gubin E., Jacques C., Marissal C. 1998. *Une citoyenneté différée ? Le suffrage féminin en Belgique 1830-1940*, in Cohen, Thébaud (sous la direction), *Féminismes et identités nationales. Le processus d'intégration des femmes au politique*, Lyon, Programme Rhône-Alpes de recherche en Sciences Humaines, p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> Muraru I., Iancu G. 1995. *Constituțiile române. Texte, note, prezentare comparativă*, București, Regia Autonomă Monitorul Oficial, ediția a III-a, pp. 29-60.

<sup>9</sup> Dogan M. 1999. *Sociologie politică. Opere alese*, trad. Laura Lotreanu, Nicolae Lotreanu, București, Alternative, pp. 139-198.

<sup>10</sup> Women who could elect and be elected had to meet one of the following requirements: be a war widow, a civil servant at the commune, the department or the state level, be decorated for services during the war, be a graduate from elementary, normal or secondary school, or member of the executive committee of an association with a social programme.

<sup>11</sup> Auslander L. 1998. *Le vote des femmes et l'imaginaire de la citoyenneté. L'État-nation en France et en Allemagne*, in Sohn, Thélamon, (colloque organisé), *L'Histoire sans les femmes est-elle possible?*, Paris, Librairie Académique Perrin, pp. 73-86.

membership in the body of the nation, women were expected to stay at home to raise children, and as mothers they did not have political rights. The nation was feminine, and the State was of male gender<sup>12</sup>. The entry of women in the state was made at the time of partial granting of political rights for women.

Once entered in politics, Romanian women started to build different political imaginaries, depending on their group membership, moderate or radical. We can identify two political imaginaries belonging to the Union of Romanian Women (UFR), founded in 1918, a moderate feminist group chaired by Maria Baiulescu, and another imaginary belonging to Romanian National Group of Women (GNFR) established in 1929 and chaired by Alexandrina Cantacuzino. Prominent feminists of UFR adhered to the National Peasants' Party and National Liberal Party after obtaining the partial political rights in 1929, while feminists grouped around Alexandrina Cantacuzino created a political party that proposed the cooperation with politicians only if the views of feminists would be accepted<sup>13</sup>. If feminists members of UFR wanted to become loyal collaborators of political parties, feminists members of GNFR wanted to separate from parties in order to keep their political independence. The UFR condemned the position of GNFR who wanted to break the link between mother, husband, son or brother, and refused to join the Group created by Cantacuzino.

The entry of women in Romanian politics was based on their role in the imaginary they created. An important moment in the evolution of the imaginary of the UFR was made by a strong propaganda waged by the women members of the organization for the introduction of a mandatory proportion of women in municipal councils. Women voted this resolution on the occasion of the Congresses of UFR, in 1932 and 1936, but party colleagues did not consider this claim<sup>14</sup>. The idea of quotas is therefore in Romania since the period between the two World Wars.

In Belgium the partial granting of political rights to women in 1921 allowed their entry into the political arena, but this entry was not spectacular because the main political parties and the Catholic Party contributed to the petrification of the political imaginary in which women were good housewives. For their part, women members of the Catholic Party also contributed to the perpetuation of the political imaginary, considering that their place was at home. In 1933 Louise van den Plas, the representative of the women's organization of the Catholic Party, emphasized the functional inequality of the sexes, because man had the "first place in the order of authority [...] and women the first place in the order of respect"<sup>15</sup>.

We observe the difference between the actions of Romanian and Belgian feminists in the '30s: Romanian feminists asked for the introduction of quotas, while the Belgian feminists insisted on the difference between women and men.

As for the evolution of women's political rights in France, these were granted in 1944. The explanation for this delay resides in the place that the French women held in the imaginary of citizenship: they were the mothers called to educate the future citizens<sup>16</sup>. Even if during the period between the two World Wars feminists addressed petitions to the Senate for the recognition of their political rights, their claims remained unanswered. The end of the First World War seemed the right moment for the application of these rights because women had proven their abilities to replace men who had gone to the front. Under

<sup>12</sup> Auslander L., Zancarini-Fournel M. 2000. *Le genre de la nation et de l'État*, Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Société, no. 12, pp. 5-13.

<sup>13</sup> *Gruparea Națională a Femeilor Române. Statut*. 1929. București, Tipografia Lupta, pp. 3-15. The statute is reproduced by Mihăilescu Ș. 2002. *Din istoria feminismului românesc. Antologie de texte (1838-1929)*, Iași, Polirom, pp. 319-328.

<sup>14</sup> Cosma G. 2002. *Femeile și politica în România. Evoluția dreptului de vot în perioada interbelică*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Plas van den L. 1933. *Le Féminisme chrétien*, janvier, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Cova A. 2004. *La maternité, un enjeu dans le premier XXe siècle*, in Gubin, Jacques, Rochefort, Studer, Thébaud, Zancarini-Fournel (sous la direction de), *Le Siècle des féminismes*, Paris, Les Editions de l'Atelier/Éditions Ouvrières, pp. 195-208.

the image of the "citizen-soldier", states like Great Britain granted political rights to women<sup>17</sup>. But this was not the case for France, which prolonged the time until after the Second World War. Another explanation for the delay was in the French universalist perspective described by Pierre Rosanvallon: women were denied political rights because of their specificity, while the "English" universalism granted the political rights for women with such specificity<sup>18</sup>. French feminists tried to escape this political imaginary created by men where they fulfilled only the role of mothers, by creating an imaginary world extended beyond the home, in order to act in the political arena: the French newspaper *La Française*, for example, presented the political demands of French women throughout the period between the two World Wars.

By briefly reviewing the evolution of women's participation in the political life in Romania, Belgium and France, we can conclude on national specificities, but also the similarities that bring these countries together in terms of the place of women in the political imaginaries.

It is important to mention that Romania was seen in Belgium in 1930 as the most advanced country in terms of the political situation of women, compared to other countries in the Balkan region (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece), and even compared to Belgium. The Belgian liberal Georgette Ciselet noted in 1930 about Romania: "*women enjoy significant political rights*"<sup>19</sup> and "*the emancipation movement of Romanian women is not limited to politics, but it shakes even the foundation of civil law [...] once again women in Romania were happier than us*"<sup>20</sup>. Thus, in the '30s Romania was a model for women's emancipation in Western countries.

#### 4. Quotas and Parity: The New Electoral Models for Romania?

The electoral system adopted could advantage or disadvantage women candidates. As observed by Garcia Munoz, Carrey or Rule, in countries where we apply the proportional system the number of mandates obtained by women is greater than in countries where the majority system is applied<sup>21</sup>. Petra Meier analyzes the impact of electoral systems on gender relations and notes that in 1999 19.8% of members of national parliaments in 53 countries were women where we applied the proportional system, 15.1% where we applied mixed or semi-proportional systems, and when in the country the majority system was applied, only 10.8% were women<sup>22</sup>.

The proportional system is a guarantee of the promotion of women in politics and the possible introduction of a majoritarian system can produce an imbalance in the political representation of women and men. In Romania the proportional system has guaranteed the representation of women in Parliament, the number of women has tripled in 2000 compared to 1992<sup>23</sup>. After the 2004 elections, the percentage raised to 11.4% in the Chamber of Deputies, which placed Romania on the 25th place in the ranking of countries in the European Union<sup>24</sup>. France occupied the 24th place, and even if the parity was applied after the 2002 elections, women represented 13% of the National Assembly. As for Belgium, it occupied the 5th place: after the 2003 elections for the House women represented 35.33%.

<sup>17</sup> Marques-Pereira B. 2003. *La citoyenneté politique des femmes*, cit., pp. 54-55.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Ciselet G. 1930. *La Femme. Ses droits, ses devoirs et ses revendications. Esquisse de la situation légale de la femme en Belgique et à l'étranger*, Bruxelles, L'Églantine, p. 144.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> Meier P. 2005. *Le système électoral belge et les rapports de genre*, in Marques-Pereira, Meier, (eds), *Genre et politique en Belgique et en francophonie*, Louvain-La-Neuve, Bruylant Academia, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>23</sup> Ghebrea G., Tătărâm M. E. Crețoiu I. 2005. *Politici de gen în România. Două studii de caz*, București, Nemira, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> The classification was carried out by the Robert Schuman Foundation.



Petra Meier observes that the party list in the proportional system ensures gender equality and the author also gives some explanation: in proportional systems several candidates can be proposed, so there is the possibility to propose new candidates<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand, in a proportional system, several candidates represent various sections of society, while in the majority system there is one candidate who should represent the whole society. This single candidate is almost always a man. Another element that differentiates the proportional and majoritarian system is the "contamination effect", which presupposes that a party that proposes women candidates will be imitated by other parties, something that rarely happens in the majority system. A final element identified by Petra Meier is the centralization of candidate selection procedures in proportional systems, which facilitates advocacy beyond the individual constituency<sup>26</sup>. The conclusion is that women candidates are more advantaged in proportional systems than in majoritarian systems. To ensure gender equality in Romania we could maintain the proportional system.

But there is the possibility to choose other electoral models, such as parity or quotas. The presentation of these two possibilities of election will show us their limitations and shortcomings.

We'll start with the French case law of parity which was enacted in 2000 and requires the parties to submit lists in which women represent 50% of the number of candidates, parties that do not meet this condition being amended. The strict application of the law on parity has led to positive outcomes for women after the local elections of 2001, when they accounted for 47.5% in local councils. After the regional elections of 2004, they were in a proportion of 47.6%, and after the elections to the European Parliament in 2004, they represented 43.6% of elected officials<sup>27</sup>. Regarding elections where parity has not been applied, the results are negative for women. Janine Mossuz-Lavau observes that the biggest problem remains the elections for the National Assembly: although in 2002 the parity law was in force, the women elected represented 12.3%<sup>28</sup>: the major parties as the UMP and the Socialist Party preferred to receive fines instead of complying with the law on parity. We must observe at the same time that where the majority system was applied (the case of elections to the French Senate), the number of women was the same after the 2002 elections - two women senators. We can say that the parity law can ensure the promotion of women in politics, provided that the law has a binding effect on the parties, and not just an incentive effect, as was the case in the 2002 legislative elections. Another conclusion is that the application of the majority system produces "petrification" of the representation of women in politics.

In Belgium, the quota law was passed in 2002 and applied to the elections of 2003 and 2004. This Act provides for an equal number of men and women on the lists and candidates of different sexes for the first three places. The road to gender equality in Belgian politics is opened by the Smet-Tobback law of 1994 which required 2/3 candidates of the same sex. From 2003 new quotas were applied that provided a woman should occupy the third place on the list: in the 2003 legislative elections the parties did more than to enforce this law: 63% of lists had female candidates for both first and second place, and only 31% had a candidate listed on the third place<sup>29</sup>.

Petra Meier considers that the impact of quotas on women's representation in Belgian politics has been great: after the elections of 2003 and 2004 the number of women elected increased to different assemblies. Meier notes that if the number of eligible positions on the lists is reduced, men benefit more

<sup>25</sup> Meier P. 2005. *Le système électoral belge et les rapports de genre*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>27</sup> Mossuz-Lavau J. 2005. *Genre et science politique en France*, in Marques-Pereira, Meier, (eds), *Genre et politique en Belgique et en francophonie*, Louvain-La-Neuve, Academia Bruylant, p. 134.

<sup>28</sup> *Idem*. In Accordance with the classification of the Robert Schumann Foundation, the French women represented 13% of the National Assembly after the 2002 elections.

<sup>29</sup> Meier P. 2005. *Le système électoral belge et les rapports de genre*, cit., p. 31.

than women. When one candidate was elected on a list in 2004, in 84% of cases it was a man, when the first two candidates were elected, in 44% of cases it was a man and a woman, but never two women, and when the first three candidates were elected, in 71% of cases it was only one woman among them<sup>30</sup>. Meier believes that the eligible positions on the lists must be more than six for an increased number of women to be elected.

## 5. The Electoral System and Its Influence on the Political Imaginary

At the beginning of our study we stated that women constituted the "nation" in the political imaginary of the men: she was supposed to take care of household, to be the perfect mother and wife. The question that arises is whether the electoral system, the laws on quotas or parity can change the perception of women. The brief analysis of the results of the implementation of parity in France has shown that women have not come to represent 50% of the municipal councils, regional councils or the National Assembly. The conclusion is that we need more than an electoral law to ensure gender equality in politics. The first step would be to change attitudes. In Sweden, where we apply the proportional system, women represent 52.15% of the Parliament, so Sweden ranks first in the ranking of EU countries regarding the number of women parliamentarians. It is not necessary to apply the parity for women in order to have a representation of 50% in the Parliament. Sweden parity has been exceeded and the explanation resides in the tradition of regarding women as equal to men in politics: Sweden has granted political rights to women in 1919, in Romania and in France the full political rights were granted in 1944, and in Belgium in 1948<sup>31</sup>.

Citizens of the countries of Northern Europe are accustomed to seeing women in a "professional" role in politics, and politicians do not need to promote the parity. In the political imaginary of the men from Nordic countries, women are not only the nation, but they are also part of the state. Even if the proportional system is applied, women are able to represent more than half of the Swedish Parliament. The conclusion is that we could maintain the proportional system in Romania and women have equal representation in legislatures, but the condition is to have open attitudes towards the increased participation of women in politics<sup>32</sup>.

Because in Romania the tradition of gender equality in politics does not exist, the electoral measures such as parity or quotas are necessary to ensure equal representation of women and men in parliament. The first step is *"the introduction of quotas of representation and other measures of positive discrimination [...] For example 30% quotas for parliament and local councils, before moving to parity system"*<sup>33</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

Parity and quotas can be solutions to ensure gender equality in Romanian politics. But to get to the adoption of these measures the electoral population has to see the woman-politician before the woman-mother and woman-wife. According to the Public Opinion Barometer from October 2005, conducted by

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> For women's political rights in countries of North Europe, France and Belgium, v. Marques-Pereira B. 2003. *La citoyenneté politique des femmes*, cit., pp. 49-51, pp. 56-60. For the evolution of political rights in Romania v. Cosma G. 2002. *Femeile și politica în România. Evoluția dreptului de vot în perioada interbelică*, cit.

<sup>32</sup> Ghebre G., Tătăramă M. E., Crețoiu I. 2005. *Politici de gen în România. Două studii de caz*, cit., p. 89.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 90.



Gallup, one half of the Romanian population believed that men are better political leaders than women, and 40% of women had the same opinion, while 31% of Romanians considered that a wife who did not work was accomplished in the same extent as a wife who worked. Under these conditions where attitudes are frozen, it is momentarily difficult to envisage a public debate on quotas and parity.